

THE TRADITION OF DEVOTIONAL PAINTING FOR LORD JAGANNATH

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Art and devotion are like distinct yet interwoven notes in symphonies of the heart; their high points have been reached whenever they are original, individualistic, and with no cause other than creative or divine madness. Both are pleasing to the heart and both provide a shelter and release from life's anxieties. In the words of U. S. novelist Willa Cather (1873–1947), “Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had.”¹

In India, the Vedic tradition placed great emphasis on art as a form of religious expression. According to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (11.27.12):

*śailī dāru-mayī lauhī lepyā lekhyā ca saikatī
mano-mayī maṇi-mayī pratimāṣṭa-vidhā smṛtā*

The deity form of the Lord is said to appear in eight varieties — stone, wood, metal, earth, paint, sand, the mind or jewels.

Thus, in *Bhāgavata* culture,² painting is one of the eight mediums into which God can be invoked. The origin and various aspects of painting are discussed in the Sanskrit scripture *Citrakṣaṇa*. The first chapter therein describes the important role of paintings in Vedic heritage and spiritual life:

*caityānāṁ karaṇāyaiva citraṁ saṁlikhyate yataḥ
vedāc citraṁ prajātaṁ vai tasmād jñeyam tathaiva tat*

According to the Vedas, artistic drawings, referred to as “*citra*”, are required for the creation of sacred places [such as monuments, monasteries, and places of religious ritual and worship]. (1.90)

The *Brahma-saṁhitā* (5.37) refers to sixty-four different arts; *Citrakṣaṇa* (1.94-95) says that among the arts, painting has a special position:

*himālayo yathā śreṣṭho nageṣu sakaleṣu ca
gaṅgā naḍīṣu śreṣṭhaiva graheṣu soma-bhāskarau
sameṣu vainateyaś ca mahendro deva-vṛndake
tathā śreṣṭhaṁ bhavec citraṁ savasti hi kalāsu ca*

As the Himalayas are the greatest of mountains, the Ganges the best of rivers, the sun and moon the best of planets, Garuda the best of birds, and Indra the best of the demigods, similarly, painting is the best of all the arts.

In his commentary on the above mentioned verse of *Brahma-saṁhitā*, Thakur Bhaktivinode (1838-1914), the theologian and saint who first presented the teachings of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu in a modern context, elucidates on the sixty-four various arts and explains that they are all meant to be devotional offerings to the Lord. The above scriptural references give us some idea of why throughout India one finds multifarious and rich artistic traditions all closely connected with worship of different forms of God.

Place of Great Art

The synthesis of art and devotion is conspicuous in the worship of Lord Jagannath, the ancient deity of Krishna accompanied by his brother and sister that is established at Puri in Orissa. Indeed, one of the names of Orissa is “*Utkala*”, which means “the place of excellence of art”. Orissa is famous for its artistic carvings, dance, music, architecture, literature, weaving, and paintings, all of which are intimately related to

the worship of Jagannath.

Traditional Orissan painting is known as *paṭa-citra*. “*Paṭa*” means “canvas”, and “*citra*” means “picture”.³ The use of paper did not come to Orissa until the end of the sixteenth century, and was not the common medium for use in writing and painting until the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.⁴ Prior to that, writing was done in the age-old system of etching on palm leaves, and the palm leaf manuscripts of scriptural texts were often illustrated with original *paṭa-citra* art.

Due to centuries of continual Hindu rule under the protection and patronage of strong local kings and zamindars, Orissa has managed to retain much of its *vaiṣṇava* culture, of which *paṭa-citra* art has been an inseparable part since the earliest recorded times. *Paṭa-citra* style paintings have been found in ancient caves such as those at Udayagiri near Bhubaneswar, which historians date to around 200 BC. Many of the oldest temples in the state, such as the Mukteshwar Mandir in Bhubaneswar, bear on their walls and ceilings faint remnants of *paṭa-citra* paintings made long, long ago.⁵

Paṭa-citra and Jagannath

The artists of Orissa are known as *citrakāras*, literally, “picture makers”. In Orissan society they are considered to be *śūdras*⁶ by caste. The ancestral surnames they use are Maharana, Mahapatra, Das, Datta-mahapatra, etc. The Datta-mahapatras of Puri are considered to be descendents of the *śabara* king Vishvasu, who, according to *Skanda Purāṇa*, was the first devotee to worship Lord Jagannath. For hundreds or perhaps thousands of years the Datta-mahapatras and other *citrakāras* have been in charge of making the decorations and pictures in Lord Jagannath’s temple and on his *ratha-yātrā* carts and other conveyances. *Paṭa-citra* paintings are integral parts of the numerous festivals, worship and rituals of Lord Jagannath.

Mādaḷā Pāñji, literally “drum chronicle”, is the official historical record of the worship of Jagannath. It lists thirty-six types of servants that were formally recognized by the Puri King Anangabhim Dev (ruled 1190-1198) as worshipers of the deity. One of the listed servants was the *citrakāra*.⁷ Similarly, the *Kaṭaka-rāja-vamśāvaliḥ*,⁸ which, like the *Mādaḷā Pāñji*, also details the history of the kings in charge of the worship of Jagannath in Puri, mentions that King Narasimhadev (ruled 1552-1577) ordered three paintings to be made each year by the *citrakāras* of the deities of Jagannath, Baladev and Subhadra.⁹ These paintings known as *aṇasara-paṭi* were installed annually as temporary deities and worshiped during the two-week *anavasara* period that follows *snāna-yātrā*, Jagannath’s public bath. During this time the deities are repainted by *citrakāras* of the Datta-mahapatra family, and some of the outer layers of the deities’ bodies are replaced. Even today, the devotees are not able to see Jagannath for the duration of the *anavasara* period and hence suffer pangs of separation, which are somewhat mitigated by being able to behold the *aṇasara-paṭi*. Finally, at the completion of the two-week period, the deities give audience for one day before the *ratha-yātrā* festival. That day, huge crowds of jubilant pilgrims come to see their beloved Lord, thus extinguishing the burning fire of separation in their hearts. This event is known as “*nava-yauvana* (newly youthful) *darśana*”, indicating Jagannath’s fresh new appearance.

Some of the other celebrations of Jagannath that the *citrakāras* contribute to are:¹⁰

Nava-kalevara: The festival wherein Lord Jagannath gets a new body. Approximately every two years and eight months there is a leap (extra) month in the Vedic calendar. When this leap month occurs between the *snāna-yātrā* and *ratha-yātrā* festivals,¹¹ the bodies of the deities of Jagannath, Baladev and Subhadra are changed. This event is known as “*nava-kalevara*”, on the occasion of which the old deities are retired and new ones are fashioned.¹² After the carving of the new deities is complete, it is the Datta-mahapatra *citrakāras* who wrap the deity with special ropes,

cover them with cloth, and finally paint their features. This ceremonial painting of the deities is known as *banaka-lāgi*.¹³

Ratha-yātrā: Jagannath's famous chariot festival takes place in the month of *Āṣāḍha* (June-July). In this event, the main deities of Jagannath, Baladev, and Subhadra are brought outside the temple and placed on large chariots.¹⁴ The hundreds of thousands of attending pilgrims then pull the chariots by ropes from the main temple in Puri known as the Sri Mandir to the temple known as Gundhicha located a few miles north, where they stay for a week. The *citrakāra* families paint the chariots, the wooden horses, and the many deities and figures mounted in various places of each chariot. This service is exclusively performed by individuals who come in particular lineages. There are eighteen different families who paint the chariot of Jagannath, fourteen who paint Balabhadra's, and six who paint the chariot of Subhadra.

Jhulana-yātrā: This swing festival is celebrated for one week in the month of *Śrāvana* (July-August). At this time the small *utsava*, or festival, deities are swung. Various birds and animals made from a soft plant, *sola* (or the pith plant),¹⁵ similar in texture and strength to balsa wood are brought from the temple storeroom. The *citrakāras* then freshly paint them before they are used to ornament the swing arena. Paintings of peacocks, parrots, cows with their young calves, etc. as well as depictions of Radha Krishna, Laksmi Narayan, Sita Rama, and large numbers of young *gopī* maidens, are made and hung on the walls.

Janmāṣṭamī and Vāmana-dvādaśī: For the celebrations of Krishna's birthday and the birthday of Vishnu's incarnation of Vamanadev, both of which take place in the month of *Bhādra* (August-September), the *citrakāras* make special paintings illustrating the birth of Krishna (known as *janmāṣṭamī-paṭi*) and of the dwarf incarnation Vaman. The pictures are then formally installed and worshiped like deities.

As described above, the artistic contributions of the *paṭa-citra* artists are intrinsic parts of the ancient worship and culture of Lord Jagannath. For this reason, in his book, *Paṭa-paintings of Orissa*, Bijoy Chandra Mohanty has opined: "It is obvious that the techniques of the *paṭa* art originated from the art of painting the trinity [Jagannath, Baladev, and Subhadra]" (p. 6).

Art as Worship

Paṭa-citra art is not only an element of service offered to Jagannath on his festivals, in its traditional form it is itself a form of worship. If one carefully considers — all the essential elements of *pūjā* (formal worship) are also found in orthodox *paṭa-citra* art. The *pañcarātrika* literatures,¹⁶ divide *pūjā* into five processes, known as *pañcāṅga-pūjā*.¹⁷

- 1) *abhigamana* — cleansing of oneself as well as the place, paraphernalia, and object of worship.
- 2) *upādāna* — collecting ingredients for worship such as sandalwood paste and flowers.
- 3) *yoga* — conceptualizing oneself in one's spiritual identity, and conceptualizing one's relationship (ie. fraternal, paternal, conjugal etc.) with the worshipable deity.
- 4) *svādhyāya* — reciting mantras or Vedic literature while meditating on their meaning.

5) *ijyā* — worshiping the Lord.

These classical elements of worship can be seen in *paṭa-citra* art as follows:

Abhigamana, cleanliness: The *Viṣṇu-dharmottara Purāṇa* has given various instructions for *citrakāras*, some of which include the elements classically found in *abhigamana*. Artists are enjoined therein to first take bath and wear clean cloth before painting.¹⁸ The general *citrakāras* of Orissa today do not observe this injunction as a formal part of their work. However, the artists who make the *aṇasara-paṭi* and other ceremonial paintings used in the worship of Lord Jagannath still follow a number of strict rules of *abhigamana* while they are painting. The edicts to be observed while making the *aṇasara-paṭi* include:¹⁹

- Before starting to paint, the painter's house must be thoroughly cleaned
- He has to sleep on the bare floor
- He must observe celibacy
- He may accept only vegetarian food, with no onions or garlic
- He must take bath and wear clean cloth each time before working on the painting

Upādāna, collecting ingredients: The *pañcāṅga-pūjā* system places great stress on the importance of offering particular items, which are both natural and pure. For centuries, orthodox *paṭa-citra* artists have followed certain codes regarding the materials they use for their paintings. The standard canvas for *paṭa-citra* paintings is made from layers of aged white cotton cloth that are stuck together using paste made from tamarind seeds. A mixture of tamarind paste, lime and water is then smeared on the top. After it is dry, it is polished with stones and then cut to size.²⁰ This is still the system used by some *paṭa-citra* artists; however, today most of them use *tassar* silk²¹ for their canvas.

Similarly, although nearly all contemporary *citrakāras* use modern conventional paints, natural pigments are still in use.²² Such non-artificial hues are the only type of colors allowed when painting the deities or making ceremonial pictures for Lord Jagannath's worship.²³

Paṭa-citra artists use five primary colors called *pañca-tattva*, literally "five truths", which they consider to be associated with five divinities as follows:

* **Black:** Associated with the black-colored Lord Jagannath. This is obtained from lampblack. The paint is made by first making a stand out of coconuts upon which a brass plate is balanced. A lamp which is burning oil extracted from the *polāṅga* plant²⁴ is then placed underneath. After half an hour or so the soot on the plate is collected and then mixed with the gum of the *kaitha* plant.²⁵

* **White:** Associated with Lord Baladeva, due to his whitish color. The *citrakāras* make white paint from conch shells which are first soaked in water for two days, ground finely, mixed with *kaitha* fruit, boiled to a paste, and then dried in the sun.

* **Yellow:** Associated with Devi Subhadra, due to her yellowish color. This paint is made from finely ground *haritāla* stone (yellow ochre that contains sulphate of arsenic). The ochre is finely ground, allowed to settle in water, and boiled down to a thick paste. It is then formed into tablets and dried.

* **Red:** Associated with the altar in Puri upon which the above four deities sit. The altar is not visibly red; its association with this color may be due to the fact that it is popularly known as the *ratna-simhāsana*, "jeweled throne". The *paṭa-citra* artists make this color from two types of stone known in Oriya as *hiṅgula*, and *gairika*, containing natural cinnabar and red ochre respectively. The red ochre is processed into paint

using the same procedure as the yellow ochre above.

* **Blue:** Associated with the Sudarshan Chakra, the disk weapon of Krishna/Jagannath that is worshiped as a fourth, smaller deity next to the above three. Sudarshan is also known as *nīla-cakra*, or “the blue wheel”. This paint is made from the *nīla gacha*, the indigo plant, or from a soft stone known as *rājabarta*.

These paints are kept in coconut shell bowls.

Before painting, the artists often first sketch their drawings with a kind of crayon that is made by mixing lampblack and boiled rice and rolling it into a pencil shape. The brushes customarily used to apply the paints are made by tying hairs to a twig.²⁶ The commonly used twig for this purpose was obtained from the *kherwa*, or *khurni*, ie. bitter oleander.²⁷ This plant is said to have been born from drops of heavenly nectar that fell on the ground from the bodies of Ramachandra’s monkey soldiers who had been restored to life by Indra, the king of the devas.²⁸ Thus even the insignificant brushes used by the *paṭa-citra* artists have some connection with their worshipable Jagannath, who is considered to be non-different from Krishna and Ramachandra.

Yoga, conceptualizing oneself in one’s spiritual identity and conceptualizing one’s relationship with the Lord: The *paṭa-citra* artists of Orissa identify themselves in connection with Visvakarma, who in Orissan lore is widely considered to be the first artist and source of the arts, as well as the first *śilpa-kāra* or carver to fashion the original deity of Jagannath. Visvakarma is the master craftsman of the *devas* and the patron deity of workmen and artists.

The *Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa* (1.10.19-91) describes the origin of the various kinds of craftsmen. Visvakarma and the heavenly damsel known as Ghritachi were cursed to become lower caste *śūdras* on the earth planet. In that birth, Visvakarma begot nine sons in the womb of Ghritachi. Since their parents were *śūdras*, the descendents of these nine children were also considered to be so. *Brahma-vaivarta* (1.10.90) lists the nine types of craftsmen born of their union:

mālākāra-karmakāṃsaśaṇṇjakāra-kuvindakān
kumbhakāra-sūtradhāra-svarṇacitrakarāmsthā

- 1) *mālākāra* — garland makers, gardeners, or florists
- 2) *karmakāra* — blacksmiths, or mechanics [also refers to hired laborers or servants of any kind]
- 3) *śankhadāra* — carvers of conch shells
- 4) *kuvindaka* — weavers
- 5) *kumbhakāra* — potters
- 6) *kāmsyakāra* — brass or metal-workers
- 7) *sūtradhāra* — architects, carpenters [also a name for stage managers]
- 8) *svarṇakāra* — goldsmiths
- 9) *citrakāra* — painters

Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa says that these nine all became experts in *kalā*, the arts. Hence the Orissan *citrakāras* identify themselves with Visvakarma in three ways: As the devata or patron god of art, as the original carver of their worshipable Lord Jagannath, and as the founder of the crafts, and their family.

Svādhyāya, reciting Vedic literature and meditating on its meaning: The practice of *svādhyāya* is seen in Vedic and *paṭa-citra* art in the use of the scriptures known as

dhyāna-mantra śāstras. In his masterly work, *Puri Paintings*, the art professor and scholar Jagannath Prasad Das writes:

According to *Viṣṇu-dharmottara*, one quality that spoils pictures is *anya-chittatā* or being unmindful, and the text enjoins the *citrakāra* to concentrate through *dhyāna-mantra* before starting a painting. The practice of visualization is identical in worship and art. The worshiper recites the *dhyāna-mantra* describing the deity, and thus forms a corresponding mental picture. His prayers are then addressed and his offerings are then made to this imagined form. The artist follows an identical prescription but proceeds to represent the mental picture in a visible and objective form by drawing or modeling. According to the *Agni Purāṇa*, the image-maker must pray the night before undertaking a great work in these words, “O thou Lord of all the Gods, teach me in dreams how to carry out all the work I have in my mind.”

In Orissa, many *dhyāna-mantra* texts are available in palm leaf manuscripts. Some of these texts are also accompanied by drawings of the Gods and Goddesses corresponding to the *dhyāna-mantra*. The texts are, however, in Sanskrit and are not intelligible to the *citrakāra*. The *citrakāra* of today does not in any case recite the *dhyāna-mantra*, nor does he go through disciplines like wearing immaculate apparel, sitting facing east etc., as enjoined by *śāstras* such as *Viṣṇu-dharmottara*. He does, however, make use of his memory of some Oriya *kāvya* [devotional poetry] describing the bodily color or garments of a God or Goddess or the limbs of *nava-guñjara*.²⁹

Ijyā, worshipping the deity: For *paṭa-citra* artists, painting itself is their *ijyā*, or practice of worship. This is especially seen in the paintings that are made for ritualistic use, such as the *aṇasara-paṭi* and others. Upon the completion of these paintings there generally is a formal ceremony known as *prāṇa-pratiṣṭha*, wherein the pictures are installed as worshipable deities. This is the same kind of process as the one used in worshipping the deities in Vedic temples. Although some of them revere Ganesh, Shiva, Durga and other gods in the Vedic pantheon, as a general rule, in terms of their religious affiliation, the *citrakāra* artists consider themselves to be Vaishnavas, devotees of Krishna. In particular, all of them worship Lord Jagannath.

Rasa

Yet another indication of the connection between *paṭa-citra* art and devotion to Jagannath is the fact that the very colors used in the paintings were considered to evoke or indicate various *rasas*. The Sanskrit word “*rasa*” literally means “mellow” or “taste”, and indicates sentiment or emotion. *Rasa* is the taste of various kinds of relationships. The particular colors considered to correspond to certain *rasas* are as follows:

- * *hāsya-rasa* (humor) — white
- * *vīra-rasa* (heroism) — yellowish white
- * *raudra-rasa* (anger) — red
- * *śṛṅgāra-rasa* (conjugal or erotic mellow) — dark blue
- * *karuṇa-rasa* (tragedy) — grey
- * *bhayānaka-rasa* (fear) — black³⁰

Thus *paṭa-citra* paintings are literally colored with emotion. This is the essence of art. As expressed by the American philosopher Susanne Langer (1895–1985): “Art is the objectification of feeling.”³¹

Aside from the colors used in *paṭa-citra* art, *rasa* also appears as one of the major subject matters of the genre. The Vaishnava philosophies of Orissa and Bengal place great emphasis on *rasa* in terms of relationships between the devotees and the Lord.

Some examples of topics in *paṭa-citra* art that are saturated with devotional mellows are as follow:

Rāma-līlā: The pastimes of Lord Ramachandra from the *Rāmāyaṇa* are a frequently depicted theme in *paṭa-citra* art.

Kṛṣṇa-līlā: Krishna's Vrindavan pastimes are a favorite topic of the *citrakāras*. Subjects that are repeatedly expressed from *kṛṣṇa-līlā* include depictions of Krishna's birth, the killing of Kamsa and various demons, the lifting of Govardhan Hill, the subjugation of the snake demon Kaliya, and the stealing of the clothes of the unmarried *gopīs*.

Rāsa-līlā: Within the context of Krishna's Vrindavan pastimes, special emphasis is seen on Krishna's pastimes with Radha and the *gopī* damsels in the loving dance pastimes known as *rasa-līla*. Frequently painted topics in this category include:

rāsa-maṇḍala: Krishna's nocturnal dance of divine love with the Vrindavan cowherd girls. Paintings in this theme generally present Krishna with *gopīs* in small pictures set in a circular motif in the center of which stand Radha and Krishna.

gaja-rāsa: Krishna riding on an elephant that is made of the joined bodies of the *gopīs*.

kandarpa-ratha: (Cupid's chariot). Krishna is depicted riding a chariot that is made of the bodies of the *gopīs*, who act as wheels, pillars and the sides of the chariot. The driver of the chariot is Srimati Radharani. This painting, the subject of which is unique to Orissa, is one of the most popular themes in *paṭa-citra* art.

aśva-rāsa: Krishna riding on a horse made of the damsels of Vraja. Srimati Radharani is depicted as the shoulders of the horse, Lalita is the stomach, and the four legs are various *gopīs*.

Illustrations of literary works: *Paṭa-citra* art has been utilized to portray many literatures dealing with the intimate *rasa*-filled pastimes of Radha and Krishna. One of the most beautifully illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts in the Orissa State Museum is a copy of Rupa Goswami's *Vidagdha-mādhava* that has been decorated with *paṭa-citra* art. Another oft-illustrated literature is Jayadev Goswami's immortal *Gītā-govinda*.³² For hundreds of years, *Gītā-govinda* has been a major subject for Orissan art. Innumerable dancers, sculptors, singers and *paṭa-citra* artists have lent their talents to present Jayadeva's work. The Orissa State Museum has more than a dozen palm leaf manuscripts of *Gītā-govinda* illustrated with *paṭa-citra* paintings.

The above examples display some of the many ways in which *paṭa-citra* art has been a medium of expression for *rasa* and for the Vaishnava literatures of Orissa, Bengal, and Vrindavan.

Oriya Devotional Literature

While one can study the ways in which *paṭa-citra* art has been used to illustrate numerous books, another way of determining its position in Orissan culture is to examine how the subject of paintings and art appear within classical Oriya *rasika* writings.³³ J. P. Das has cautioned in this regard: "References to painting (*paṭa*, *paṭa-citra* and *citra-paṭa*) in Oriya literature cannot always be taken to be a reference to the art of painting as practiced in Orissa."³⁴ While this is undoubtedly true, at the same time the many references to art made in Oriya texts — which do not necessarily relate to Oriya art in particular — are a clear indication of the conception that

devotees, artists, and savants of Orissa held towards painting in general.³⁵

Oriya literature presents art and paintings in a very *rasika* way. Two examples cited by J. P. Das are found in the poems titled *Mathurā Maṅgala* and *Gopī-bhāṣā*.³⁶

Mathurā Maṅgala is an 18th century devotional Oriya poem written by Bhakta Charan Das. It reveals the emotions of Srimati Radharani and the residents of Vrindavan when Krishna was being taken away to “distant” Mathura,³⁷ as well as their feelings and behavior after he left. In chapter 29, entitled, *Gopī-mānāṅkara Ciṭāu* (“The Letter From all the Gopis”)³⁸ Bhakta Charan Das relates that after Krishna had left Vrindavan and was residing in Mathura, Radharani and the *gopīs* wrote him a letter. They placed a flower inside the envelope, sealed it, and drew pictures on the outside, of a snake, Hanuman, and Chandra-chuda — Lord Shiva who has the crescent moon as his ornament. There is a purport behind the use of the pictures. They were placed there for the purpose of keeping the flower fresh. The snake would take the flower into the air.³⁹ Then Hanuman, the monkey servant of Lord Ramachandra, who is famous for nearly swallowing the sun as a child, would swallow the sun, thereby preventing it from withering the offering. The moon, which Lord Shiva keeps on his head, would apply its reputed cooling properties to keep the flower fresh.

Another example of the conception of art in Oriya poetry is in the poem *Gopī-bhāṣā*: After Krishna left for Mathura, Narada visited Vrindavan and advised the *gopīs* to hang pictures of Krishna in every house in Vraja to help alleviate their pangs of separation. Narada then arranged for one thousand *citrakāras* to come, who painted pictures on the walls of each of the 16,000 *gopīs*’ homes.

The above descriptions and many similar others in Oriya writings make it clear that art in Orissa has long been considered to be a medium of devotion. Like *paṭa-citra* paintings, Oriya literature is rich in *rasa* and frequently explores the conflicting emotions evoked in union and separation.

Love in Separation

For many Vaishnavas, the highest limit of ecstatic devotional love is manifested in the sentiment of *vipralambha*, separation. Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, known also as the “Hare Krishna Movement”, has written: “Worship in separation is considered by the *Gauḍīya-madhva-sampradāya* to be the topmost level of devotional service.”⁴⁰ This theme of love in separation is found both in *paṭa-citra* art and in the *citrakāra*’s worshipable deity, Lord Jagannath.

Jagannath’s form, with his big smile, round eyes, and sunken hands and feet, is difficult to understand. There are many different conceptions as to his ontological position. According to Gaudiya Vaishnava philosophy, the apparent contradictions in these conceptions can be reconciled by understanding Jagannath’s position as the fountainhead of all incarnations of God, who reciprocates with everyone according to how they relate to him. In his *Caitanya-bhāgavata* (*madhya* 23.465), Vrindavan Das Thakur has stated, *je rūpa cintye dāse sei rūpa haya* — according to the conception the devotee has of the Lord, the Lord manifests himself for his devotee.

According to the Gaudiyas, Jagannath is Krishna in the mood of separation from his consort Radharani, his unusual form being a manifestation of his internal ecstasies. Dr K. C. Mishra in *The Cult of Jagannath* (p. 81) writes:

The Gaudiya Vaishnavas offer the following explanation regarding the incomplete forms of the deities, Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra. Once, the eight *paṭṭa mahiṣīs* (chief queens) of Sri Krishna were listening to his *līlā* at Vrindavan as narrated by Vrinda (Rohini/Devaki according to other versions) in the inner apartment of the palace of Nanda.⁴¹ They had posted Subhadra at the gate to guard against any male person coming

in. As the narration proceeded from *vr̥ndāvana-līlā* to the greatness of the *gopīs*, the two brothers Krishna and Balaram arrived at the gate and wanted to go in, but they were prevented by Subhadra. As the narration further continued, quite within the hearing of Subhadra and her brothers, they were all inspired by *mahābhāva* (the supreme feeling) and the eight *sātvika vikāras* (religious manifestations) appeared in their persons. Their bodily forms underwent change, the hands and feet becoming smaller and smaller, and the eyes more and more expanded in divine wonder. The transformation reached its climax as they heard about the greatness of Radha.

At this stage, when Narada came to the spot, he found them in the mystic posture, caused by the supreme feeling with fully expanded eyes and devoid of hands and feet, Subhadra being placed between Krishna and Balaram. Overwhelmed at this divine revelation, Narada fell at their feet and prayed them to grant such a vision to the people in *Kali-yuga*. Being pleased with his devotion, they granted his prayer with a promise that they would appear in that mystic form at Nilachal (Puri) to the people of *Kali-yuga*. Kanhai Khuntia relates this Puranic incident in his *Mahā-bhāva-prakāśa* (Chap III)...⁴²

Gaudiya Vaishnavas thus consider Jagannath to be *mahābhāva-prakāśa*, the ecstatic form of the Lord in separation from his divine energy and eternal consort Radharani. The Orissan sadhu and author Gour Govinda Swami (1929-1996), described in his book, *Embankment of Separation*:

In that form, he is feeling the acute pangs of separation from Radha. That is the form of Jagannath, *rādhā-bhāva sindhure bhāsamāna*, as if the Lord is a log of wood floating in the ocean of Radha's love. (102)

Jagannath's position as the personification of separation is also seen in the chorus line of the famous *Jagannāthāṣṭakam* prayer: *jagannātha-svāmī nayana-patha-gāmī bhavatu me* — "May Jagannath Swami kindly appear before my eyes."⁴³ This prayer thus expresses the emotions of the votary who hankers for audience of his worshipable Lord.

Art in Separation

Aside from the basic principle of paintings being a reminder of an absent loved one, the theme of *vipralambha* is a principle element in some of the most oft-used subjects in *paṭa-citra* art, as seen in the following examples:

***Aṇasara-paṭi*:** As previously described, this painting is made to provide a form of Jagannath to be worshiped in his absence during the time of his *anavasara* period.

***Kañci-vijaya*:** Illustrates a scene from a local story regarding the conflict between the Puri King Purusottam Dev ⁴⁴ and Sallwo Narasingha, the king of Kanchi in South India.⁴⁵ Purusottam Dev and a portion of his army attacked the Kanchi Raja's forces and were badly defeated. Barely escaping, the Puri king along with a few soldiers started back to Orissa, broken and dispirited. On the way, Purusottam Dev stopped at the ashram of a famous saint, Saikatacharya, a householder ascetic and ardent devotee of Jagannath. After hearing what had happened, Saikata asked the king if he had taken the blessings of Jagannath before departing on his mission. When the king replied in the negative, Saikatacharya suggested that the raja return to Puri and pray to Jagannath. Purusottam Dev returned and spent that night alone in the temple, crying and submitting himself to the deity. He is said to have had a vision wherein the Lord instructed him to again go to fight, "But this time", Jagannath told him, "My brother Balaram and I will personally accompany you." Purusottam Dev woke up refreshed and excited the next morning and quickly collected a force to accompany him to Kanchi. Their army left and began the journey south, but as they progressed, the king became more and more concerned as he saw no sign of Jagannath and Baladev. "Has the Lord abandoned me?" he wondered.

Meanwhile, Krishna and Balaram in human forms had gone ahead. The most frequently painted scene from this incident shows the two Lords on horses, stopping to take yoghurt from the devotee Manika. When asked for payment, the brothers give a valuable ring and instruct her to pass it on to the king who would be coming soon. “He will pay you”, they tell her. The king arrives shortly after, and upon seeing the ring, which he recognizes as belonging to the deity of Jagannath, he becomes filled with bliss.⁴⁶ The picture invokes ecstatic jubilation and hope after the despair of the Lord’s apparent neglect of his devotee.

Mathurā-vijaya: A favorite topic of *paṭa-citra* art, it depicts Krishna and Balaram leaving Vrindavan, surrounded by their beloved girl friends, the *gopīs*. The beautiful damsels are seen trying to stop Krishna’s chariot by grabbing hold of the horses, throwing themselves on the ground in front of the wheels, beseeching the Lord with upraised arms, and in various other poses tearfully pleading with Krishna not to go. The painting expresses the poignant fear and pain of the *gopīs* faced with the unthinkable prospect of Krishna’s absence.

* * *

Paṭa-citra art has thus provided a canvas throughout the ages for Vaishnavas to paint the agony and bliss of separation, the deepest emotions hidden in the hearts of the devotees of Jagannath. If Jagannath can be described as the ecstatic deity of separation, then *paṭa-citra* could be called the art of separation.

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¹ Godfrey St. Peter, in “The Professor’s House”, book I, ch. V (1925).

² The Vaishnava culture based on *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*.

³ “Orissan style paintings” may be a more accurate term than *paṭa-citra*. According to the materials used, there are three broad categories of paintings found in traditional Orissan art: *bhitti-citra* (wall paintings); *paṭa-citra* (textile paintings); and *talapatra* or *pothi-citra* (paintings on palm leaves). Fischer and Pathy in their article “Traditional Painting”, *Orissa Revisited*, 109. Following common usage, in this article we will use the phrase *paṭa-citra* to indicate all of these.

⁴ J. P. Das, *Puri Paintings*, 163. Also B. Ray in his article Pictorial Art in Moghul Orissa.

⁵ More details of ancient temples in Orissa decorated with paintings are found in Subas Pani’s *Illustrated Palmleaf Manuscripts of Orissa*, 5-6.

⁶ Uneducated worker class.

⁷ *Mādaḷā Pāñji*. Edited by Artavallabha Mohanty. Cuttack. 1940. Oriya. 32-33. There are many different versions of *Mādaḷā Pāñji*, some of which do not include the *citrakāras* in the list of thirty-six servants.

⁸ A Sanskrit work compiled in the early part of the 19th century from older records likely from the Jagannath temple. It is also an historical record of the Jagannath temple in Puri and of the *Gajapati-vamśa*, kings who were ruling Orissa. It is considered to be part of the broad corpus of works known by the same title “*Mādaḷā Pāñji*”. See Dr. G. C. Tripathi and Dr. Hermann Kulke’s introduction to *Kaṭakarājavamśāvali*, page i.

⁹ *Kaṭakarājavamśāvali* text 85. From the text it is clear that previously only one painting was made of all three deities together. Thus the offering of the *citrakāras* clearly predated the reign of Maharaja Narasimhadev.

¹⁰ A complete list is beyond the scope of this article. For more information see J. P. Das’ *Puri Paintings* chapter 4.

¹¹ On an average of every 32 years.

¹² For more information on *nava-kalevara*, see our article, “Nava Kalevara — Lord Jagannath’s “Change of Body” Pastime”, in *Sri Krishna Kathamrita* magazine, issue 4.

¹³ The word “*banaka*” comes from the Sanskrit word *varna*, meaning “color”. “*Lāgi*” means painting.

¹⁴ Jagannath’s chariot known as “Nandigosh” or “Chakradhvaja” is 45 feet high, Baladeva’s chariot is named “Taladhvaja” and is 44 feet, and Subhadra’s chariot “Padmadhvaja” is 43 feet.

¹⁵ *Aeschynomene aspera* and *A. indica*.

¹⁶ Literatures delineating the procedures of ceremonial worship.

¹⁷ See *Nārada-pāñcarātra* 4.20-24. A more elaborate description of the items mentioned herein is found on p. 21-22 of *Pāñcarātra Pradīpa*.

¹⁸ Das, 141.

¹⁹ Das, (p. 38) notes: “Violation of these taboos is supposed to bring calamity to the *citrakāra*. It is widely believed that *citrakāra* Raghu Das became insane because he did not observe the *aṇasara* taboos.”

²⁰ Fischer and Pathy, 112.

²¹ *Tassar* is a brownish colored silk obtained from wild silk worm cocoons.

²² In his *Pata-paintings of Orissa*, Bijoy Chandra Mohanty describes the ingredients used for painting the deity of Lord Jagannath: “The materials used in painting the Trinity are as follows: *śankha* (conch shell), *kastūrī* (musk), *kesara* (saffron), *haritāla* (yellow arsenic), *hiṅgula* (red ochre) and the gum of *kaitha* (*Feronia elephantum*).

²³ According to Sri Bhubaneswar Mahapatra, the current *citrakāra* responsible for making

the *aṇasara-pati*.

²⁴ *Mallotus philippinensis*.

²⁵ *Feronia elephantum*

²⁶ There are three types of brushes used: *sthūla*, (large or broad brushes), which are made of hairs from the ears of a calf or a buffalo's neck; *madhya* (medium size), made of hairs from the belly of a goat; and *sūkṣma* (fine brushes) of hairs from the back of a mouse.

²⁷ Sometimes called the screwpine tree. *Holarrhena antidysenterica*.

²⁸ In Sanskrit the seeds of this plant are called *indrayava*, *bhadravyava*, *vatsakabija*, or *śakrabija*, all meaning, "Indra's seed".

²⁹ Page 141. *Nava-guñjara* is a fantastic form of Krishna/Vishnu that is only found in Orissan lore. The Lord in this aspect has the head of a rooster, the neck of a peacock, the hump of a bull, a lion's waist, a snake for a tail, three legs (of an elephant, horse, and tiger), and a human hand holding a lotus.

³⁰ Rupa Goswami gives a similar description regarding color in *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu* (2.5.118), his magnum opus on the topic of *rasa* and devotion. He says that there are twelve deities or *avatāras* of Vishnu/Krishna assigned to the twelve *rasas* (five primary and seven secondary), which correspond to various colors. For instance, dark blue-colored Krishna is the deity of *śṛṅgāra-rasa*.

³¹ Article titled, "Mind, An Essay on Human Feeling", (1967).

³² This Sanskrit poem is considered to be a favorite of Lord Jagannath, who is said to be so fond of it that every night he wears a special dress known as *gītā-govindam khandua* — a twelve-foot-long red silk cloth on which *Gītā-govinda* has been inscribed.

³³ Literature that deals with the topic of *rasa*.

³⁴ Das, 190.

³⁵ J. P. Das states: "Medieval Oriya poetry abounds in references to the art of painting, which give some idea about the popular concept of the pictorial art at that time." 190.

³⁶ Ibid, 190, 193.

³⁷ Actually, only about 20 miles away.

³⁸ Page 92.

³⁹ As cobras become old their tail continues to fall off and they get shorter, and simultaneously their hoods become bigger. Thus there is a local Orissan legend that when a cobra's hood becomes big enough it is able to fly.

⁴⁰ Purport to Cc. *madhya* 4.197. See also Sanatan Goswami's *Bṛhad-bhāgavatmṛta* 1.7.125-128 with his own purports and Rupa Goswami's *Padyāvalī*, 240.

⁴¹ Generally this story is given as taking place in Dwarka, not in Nanda Maharaja's palace in Vrindavan.

⁴² Gour Govinda Swami in his book *Embankment of Separation* (chapter 8) relates a longer traditional Orissan story that gives a similar explanation of how Jagannath manifested his form.

⁴³ *Jagannāthāṣṭakam* is one of the most popular prayers offered to Jagannath and is recited every day in the temple in Puri. However, there is some dispute about its authorship. Many of the older manuscripts say that it was written by Adi Shankaracharya, other manuscripts indicate that it was spoken by Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. It seems very unlikely that it was composed, or originally spoken by Sri Chaitanya, as there are no commentaries on the prayer nor are any of the verses cited in any of the standard biographies about him. Compare that to the *Śikṣāṣṭaka* prayers, which are accredited to Mahaprabhu. There are dozens if not hundreds of commentaries on *Śikṣāṣṭaka*, and verses from it are quoted in *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* and later works of the Gaudiyas.

⁴⁴ Ruled 1470-1497.

⁴⁵ Scholars have mixed opinions on this account. Some dismiss it as mere legend and others accept it as an historical account that took place in 1476-1477 AD. See R. D. Banerjee's *History of Orissa*, vol I, (1930), p. 317, in which he speaks against the account; and R. Subramanyam's *The Suryavamsi Gajapati's of Orissa*, (1957), p. 185, in which he favors the story as true.

⁴⁶ An elaborate version of this story is found in our article, "King Purushottam Dev", *Sri Krishna Kathamrita magazine*, no. 4.